



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE PONTIFICAL MAJOR ROMAN SEMINARY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE FEAST OF OUR LADY OF THE TRUST

"LECTIO DIVINA" OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

Chapel of the Seminary

Friday, 8 February 2013

[\[Video\]](#)

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Friends,

Every year it gives me great joy to be here with you and to see so many young men bound for the priesthood who are attentive to the Lord's voice, who want to follow this voice and seek the way to serve the Lord in our time.

We have heard three verses from the First Letter of St Peter (cf. 1:3-5). Before going into this text it seems to me important to be aware of the fact that it is Peter who is speaking. The first two words of the Letter are "*Petrus apostolus*" (cf. v.1): he speaks and he speaks to the Churches in Asia and calls the faithful "chosen", and "exiles of the Dispersion" (*ibid.*). Let us reflect a little on this. Peter is speaking and — as we hear at the end of the Letter — he is speaking from Rome, which he called "Babylon" (cf. 5:13). Peter speaks as if it were a first encyclical with which the first Apostle, Vicar of Christ, addresses the Church of all time.

Peter, an apostle: thus the one who is speaking is the one who found the Messiah in Jesus Christ, who was the first to speak on behalf of the future Church: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (cf. Mt 16:16). The one who introduced us to this faith is speaking, the one to whom the Lord said: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (cf. Mt 16:19), to whom he entrusted his

flock after the Resurrection, saying to him three times: “Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep” (cf. Jn 21:15-17). And it is also the man who fell who is speaking, the man who denied Jesus three times and was granted the grace to see Jesus’ look, to feel deeply moved in his heart and to find forgiveness and a renewal of his mission. However, above all it is important that this man, full of passion, full of longing for God, full of a desire for the Kingdom of God, for the Messiah, this man who has found Jesus, the Lord and the Messiah, is also the man who sinned, who fell; and yet he remained in God’s sight and in this way he remained responsible for the Lord’s Church, he remained the one assigned by Christ, he remained the messenger of Christ’s love.

Peter the Apostle is speaking but the exegetes tell us: it is impossible for this Letter to have been written by Peter because the Greek is so good that it cannot be the Greek of a fisherman from the Sea of Galilee. And it is not only the language — the syntax is excellent — but also the thought which is already quite mature, there are actual formulas in which the faith and the reflection of the Church are summed up. These exegetes say, therefore: it had already reached a degree of development that cannot be Peter’s. How does one respond? There are two important positions: first, Peter himself — that is, the Letter — gives us a clue, for at the end of the writing he says I write to you: “By Silvanus... *dia* Silvanus”. This “by” [*dia*] could mean various things. It may mean that he [Silvanus] brings or transmits; it may mean that Silvanus helped him write it; it may mean that in practice it was really Silvanus who wrote it. In any case, we may conclude that the Letter itself points out to us that Peter was not alone in writing this Letter but it expresses the faith of a Church, which is already on a journey of faith, a faith increasingly mature. He does not write alone, as an isolated individual; he writes with the assistance of the Church, of people who help him to deepen the faith, to enter into the depths of his thought, of his rationality, of his profundity. And this is very important: Peter is not speaking as an individual, he is speaking *ex persona Ecclesiae*, he is speaking as a man of the Church, as an individual of course, with his personal responsibility, but also as a person who speaks on behalf of the Church; not only private and original ideas, not as a 19th-century genius who wished to express only personal and original ideas that no one else could have expressed first. No. He does not speak as an individualistic genius, but speaks, precisely, in the communion of the Church. In the Apocalypse, in the initial vision of Christ, it is said that Christ’s voice is like the sound of many waters (cf. Rev 1:15). This means: Christ’s voice gathers together all the waters of the world, bears within it all the living waters that give life to the world; he is a Person, but this is the very greatness of the Lord, that he bears within him all the rivers of the Old Testament, indeed, of the wisdom of peoples. And what is said of the Lord also applies here, in a different way, to the Apostle. This does not mean to say a word that is his alone, but one that really contains the waters of faith, the waters of the whole Church, and in this very way gives fertility, gives fecundity. Thus it is a personal witness which is open to the Lord and thereby becomes open and broad. So this is very important.

Then I think it is important that in the conclusion of the Letter Silvanus and Mark are mentioned, two people who were also friends of St Paul. So it is that through this conclusion the worlds of St Peter and St Paul converge: there is no exclusive Petrine theology as against a Pauline theology,

but a theology of the Church, of the faith of the Church, in which there is — of course — a diversity of temperament, of thought, of style, between the manner of speaking of Paul and that of Peter. It is right that these differences should also exist today. There are different charisms, different temperaments, yet they are not in conflict but are united in the common faith.

I would like to say something more: St Peter writes from Rome. This is important. Here we already have the Bishop of Rome, we have the beginning of Succession, we already have the beginning of the actual Primacy located in Rome, not only granted by the Lord but placed here, in this city, in this world capital. How did Peter come to Rome? This is a serious question. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that after his escape from Herod's prison, he went to another place (cf. 12:17) — *eis eteron topon* — where he went is not known; some say to Antioch, others, to Rome. In any case, in this capital it should also be said that before fleeing he entrusted the Judaeo-Christian Church, the Church of Jerusalem, to James, and in entrusting her to James he nevertheless remained Primate of the universal Church, of the Church of the Gentiles but also of the Judaeo-Christian Church. And here in Rome he found a great Judaeo-Christian community. The liturgists tell us that in the Roman Canon there are traces of a characteristically Judaeo-Christian language. Thus we see that in Rome both parts of the Church were to be found: the Judaeo-Christian and the pagan-Christian, united, an expression of the universal Church. And for Peter, moving from Jerusalem to Rome meant moving to the universality of the Church, moving to the Church of the Gentiles and of all the epochs, to the Church that also still belongs to the Jews. And I think that in going to Rome St Peter not only thought of this transfer: Jerusalem/Rome, Judaeo-Christian Church/universal Church. He certainly also remembered Jesus' last words to him, recorded by St John: "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (cf. Jn 21:18). It is a prophecy of the crucifixion. Philologists show us that "stretch out your hands" is a precise, technical expression for the crucifixion. St Peter knew that his end would be martyrdom, would be the cross: that it would therefore be following Christ completely. Consequently, in going to Rome there is no doubt that he was also going to martyrdom: martyrdom awaited him in Babylon. The primacy, therefore, has this content of universality but it has a martyrological content as well. Furthermore, Rome had been a place of martyrdom from the outset. In going to Rome, Peter once again accepts this word of the Lord: he heads for the cross and invites us too to accept the martyrological aspect of Christianity, which may have very different forms. And the cross may have very different forms, but no one can be Christian without following the Crucified One, without accepting the martyrological moment too.

After these words about the author, a brief word too about the people to whom the Letter was written. I have already said that St Peter describes those to whom he wrote with the words: "*eklektois parepidemois*", "to the chosen who are exiles of the Dispersion" (cf. 1 Pt 1:1). Once again we have this paradox of glory and of the cross: chosen, but exiles and foreigners. *Chosen*: this was Israel's title of glory: we are the chosen ones, God chose this small people not because it was more in number — Deuteronomy says — but because he loves it (cf. 7:7-8). We are *chosen*: St Peter now transfers this to all the baptized and the very content of the first chapters of his First

Letter is that the baptized are admitted to the privileges of Israel, they are the new Israel. *Chosen*: I think it is worth reflecting on this word. We are *chosen*. God has always known us, even before our birth, before our conception; God wanted me as a Christian, as a Catholic, he wanted me as a priest. God thought of me, he sought me among millions, among a great many, he saw me and he chose me. It was not for my merits, which were non-existent, but out of his goodness; he wanted me to be a messenger of his choice, which is also always a mission, above all a mission, and a responsibility for others. *Chosen*: we must be grateful and joyful for this event. God thought of me, he chose me as a Catholic, me, as a messenger of his Gospel, as a priest. In my opinion it is worth reflecting several times on this and coming back to this fact of his choice; he chose me, he wanted me; now I am responding.

Perhaps today we are tempted to say: we do not want to rejoice at having been chosen, for this would be triumphalism. It would be triumphalism to think that God had chosen me because I was so important. This would really be erroneous triumphalism. However, being glad because God wanted me is not triumphalism. Rather, it is gratitude and I think we should re-learn this joy: God wanted me to be born in this way, into a Catholic family, he wanted me to know Jesus from the first. What a gift to be wanted by God so that I could know his face, so that I could know Jesus Christ, the human face of God, the human history of God in this world! Being joyful because he has chosen me to be a Catholic, to be in this Church of his, where *subsistit Ecclesia unica*; we should rejoice because God has given me this grace, this beauty of knowing the fullness of God's truth, the joy of his love.

Chosen: a word of privilege and at the same time of humility. However "chosen" — as I said — is accompanied by the word "*parepidemois*", exiles, foreigners. As Christians we are dispersed and we are foreigners: we see that Christians are the most persecuted group in the world today, because it does not conform, because it is a stimulus, because it opposes the tendencies to selfishness, to materialism and to all these things.

Christians are certainly not only foreigners; we are also Christian nations, we are proud of having contributed to the formation of culture; there is a healthy patriotism, a healthy joy of belonging to a nation that has a great history of culture and of faith. Yet, as Christians, we are always also foreigners — the destiny of Abraham, described in the Letter to the Hebrews. As Christians we are, even today, also always foreigners. In the work place Christians are a minority, they find themselves in an extraneous situation; it is surprising that a person today can still believe and live like this. This is also part of our life: it is a form of being with the Crucified Christ; this being foreigners, not living in the way that everyone else lives, but living — or at least seeking to live — in accordance with his Word, very differently from what everyone says. And it is precisely this that is characteristic of Christians. They all say: "But everyone does this, why don't I?" No, I don't, because I want to live in accordance with God. St Augustine once said: "Christians are those who do not have their roots below, like trees, but have their roots above, and they do not live this gravity in the natural downwards gravitation". Let us pray the Lord that he help us to accept this

mission of living as exiles, as a minority, in a certain sense, of living as foreigners and yet being responsible for others and, in this way, reinforcing the goodness in our world.

Lastly let us come to the three verses of today. I would only like to stress or, let us say, briefly interpret, as far as I can, three terms: the term “born anew”, the term “inheritance”, and the term “guarded through faith”. *Born anew* — *anaghenesas*, the Greek text says — means that being Christian is not merely a decision of my will, an idea of mine; I see there is a group I like, I join this group, I share their aims, etc. No. Being Christian does not mean entering a group to do something, it is not only an act of my will, not primarily of my will, of my reason. It is an act of God. *Born anew* does not solely concern the sphere of the will or of thought, but the sphere of being. I am reborn: this means that becoming Christian is first of all passive; I cannot make myself Christian, but I am caused to be reborn, I am remade by the Lord in the depths of my being. And I enter into this process of rebirth, I let myself be transformed, renewed, reborn. This seems to me very important: as a Christian I do not just form an idea of my own that I share with a few others and if I do not like them any more I can leave. No: it concerns the very depths of being, namely, becoming a Christian begins with an action of God, above all with an action of his, and I let myself be formed and transformed.

I think that a topic for reflection, especially in a year in which we are reflecting on the sacraments of Christian Initiation, is the meditation on this: this passive and active depth of being born anew, of becoming one with Christian life, of letting myself be transformed by his Word, for the communion of the Church, for the life of the Church, for the signs with which the Lord works in me, works with me and for me. And being reborn, being born anew, also means that I thereby enter a new family: God, my Father, the Church, my mother, other Christians, my brothers and sisters. Being born anew, letting ourselves be born anew, therefore involves deliberately letting ourselves be incorporated into this family, living for God the Father and by God the Father, living by communion with Christ his Son who causes me to be born anew through his Resurrection, as the Letter says (cf. 1 Pet 1:3), living with the Church, letting myself be formed by the Church in so many ways, in so many processes, and being open to my brethren, really recognizing others as my brothers and sisters, who are born anew with me, transformed, renewed; each is responsible for the other, hence a responsibility of Baptism which is a life-long process of the whole of life.

The second term: *inheritance*. It is a very important word in the Old Testament, where Abraham is told that his seed will inherit the earth, and this was always the promise for his descendents. You will have the earth, you will be heirs of the earth. In the New Testament, this word becomes a word for us; we are *heirs*, not of a specific country, but of the land of God, of the future of God. Inheritance is something of the future, and thus this word tells us above all that as Christians we have a future, the future is ours, the future is God's. Thus, being Christians, we know that the future is ours and the tree of the Church is not a tree that is dying but a tree that constantly puts out new shoots. Therefore we have a reason not to let ourselves be upset, as Pope John said, by the prophets of doom who say: well, the Church is a tree that grew from the mustard seed, grew

for two thousand years, now she has time behind her, it is now time for her to die. No. The Church is ever renewed, she is always reborn. The future belongs to us. Of course, there is a false optimism and a false pessimism. A false pessimism tells us that the epoch of Christianity is over. No: it is beginning again! The false optimism was the post-Council optimism, when convents closed, seminaries closed and they said “but... nothing, everything is fine!”.... No! Everything is not fine. There are also serious, dangerous omissions and we have to recognize with healthy realism that in this way things are not all right, it is not all right when errors are made. However, we must also be certain at the same time that if, here and there, the Church is dying because of the sins of men and women, because of their non-belief, at the same time she is reborn. The future really belongs to God: this is the great certainty of our life, the great, true optimism that we know. The Church is the tree of God that lives for ever and bears within her eternity and the true inheritance: eternal life.

And, lastly, “guarded through faith”. The New Testament text, from the Letter of St Peter, uses a rare word here, *phrouroumenoi*, which means: there are the “guards” and faith is like the guards who preserve the integrity of my being, of my faith. This word interprets in particular “the guards” at the gates of a city, where they stand and keep watch over the city so that it is not invaded by destructive powers. Thus faith is a “guard” of my being, of my life, of my inheritance. We must be grateful for this vigilance of faith that protects us, helps us, guides us, gives us the security: God does not let me fall from his hands: *Safeguarded by faith*: I’ll end with this. Speaking of faith I must always think of that sick woman among the crowd who, gaining access to Jesus, touched him in order to be healed and was healed. The Lord said: “Who touched my garments?”. They said to him: “You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘who touched me?’” (cf. Mk 5:25-34, 7:27-30). But the Lord knows there is a way of touching him that is superficial, external, that really has nothing to do with a true encounter with him. And there is a way of touching him profoundly. And this woman truly touched him: she did not only touch him with her hand, but with her heart and thus received Christ’s healing power, truly touching him from within, from faith. This is faith: touching Christ with the hand of faith, with our heart, and thus entering into the power of his life, into the healing power of the Lord. And let us pray the Lord that we may touch him more and more, so as to be healed. Let us pray that he will not let us fall, that he too may take us by the hand and thus preserve us for true life. Many thanks.